

Muriel

How can she do this to me, my own daughter? She moves into my home, last year—against my wishes by the way—puts her damp cheek to mine and whispers in that syrupy voice of hers that her father shall not suffer the indignity of a home for the old. Will not pass on surrounded by strangers. Now she's got in a care worker, young enough to be my grandson, while she's cavorting in a Paris hotel with some up-start from work.

The care worker bends over, sighs and then tucks in the bedsheets too tight. I put it to him, this jumped-up pair of trousers: 'Why do you have holes in your jeans?'

'That's a good question, Mr O' Grady.'

He's Irish and sounds like my old man. I'm a London boy born and bred. Got roots in Paddy land, that's all.

'I guess the holes are fashionable. Can I call yer Frank, Frank?'

'You're old enough to be wearing grown-up clothes, aren't you? And no, you can't call me Frank.'

'All right then, we'll keep it formal ... Frank.'

Cheeky fledgling. 'You've tucked in these sheets too tight. You think it's funny torturing a man with no legs?'

He loosens the sheet on one side of the bed.

'What you doing, wasting ya time on cripples like me?'

'Cripples, is it?' he says, lip out, shaking his head. 'Can yer not find another word for a man in your unfortunate situation, Frank?'

The only way the fireman could separate me from the dashboard was to amputate just above the knee. They left the rest of my legs in the crumpled remains of my beloved Triumph Dolomite. I was knocked out and they kept me like that—sedated—for two

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weeks. When I came round my first word was, “shit.” I haven’t changed my opinion. ‘Do you have children?’

‘Not yet.’ He sucks in his lips and rolls his eyes to the carpet. ‘I was sorry to hear yer lost your wife.’

‘Lost? She’s not down the back of the sofa. She’s dead, you gibbon.’

‘But yer alive, Frank.’ He drops to his knees and starts picking up used tissue I’ve thrown on the floor.

It’s a moment I’ve lived over and over: My wife managed to free herself from her seatbelt so that when we hit a tree—her pulling at the steering wheel screaming for me to stop—the impact catapulted her clean through the windscreen. I succeeded in ending her pain—cancer had already spread to her bones—but for me, the pain was just settling into the marrow.

‘And just to clarify yer daughter hired me through an agency to look after yer while she’s away. Yer do know she’s in Paris, right?’

‘Just because I’m a cripple it doesn’t make me senile. My body’s knackered but I’m as *compos mentis* now as I was when I killed my wife.’

On all fours, scrabbling around on the carpet, he stops and turns, like a dog that’s discovered it has a tail. ‘Yer did what?’

‘Didn’t Rachel tell you?’ I could toss a doggy treat into that gawping gob of his. ‘Rachel’s my daughter.’

He shakes his head, such a small movement from right to left—more like a nervous twitch. ‘I know who Rachel is,’ he says.

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‘If I hadn’t glanced at my wife, I would have avoided the tree and plunged us off the cliff edge together, as planned. I could never resist those emerald green eyes. Now pass my teeth. I can’t speak proper without ‘em.’

He silently passes a glass with my teeth in, the previous lightness to his actions replaced by slow, heavy movements. It’s a relief. He was beginning to annoy me with his perpetual let’s-look-on-the-bright-side tone.

‘You tried to kill the both of yer?’ he says.

‘Tried and failed. So if you happen to leave a box of paracetamol on my bedside table, expect me to tip the contents down my throat and join my wife in the never after.’

‘Right,’ he says and ambles out with his hands full of used tissue.

Rachel tried to introduce us last night, but I pretended to be asleep. Before shutting the bedroom door she told him I was sulking because she was going away for the weekend. Of course I’m missing her, but that’s just a nagging inconvenience compared to the void my wife left. I’m not supposed to be here. Don’t tell me the universe is indifferent to suffering. It’s lapping it up—the fact he’s here, rubbing his own brand of Paddy salt into my wounds, proves that. I take the teeth from the glass. It’s not a full set, just six front ones on the top row from where I rode my bike into the back of a milk float when I was sixteen. My wife insisted I soak them every night; they taste cold and minty from the toothpaste in the water.

When he comes back in, he puts a mug of tea down on the bedside table and walks towards the curtains. ‘Yer daughter said you haven’t been out for a year.’

‘Keep the curtains shut. I don’t want light.’

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‘She warned me you’d fight me over this.’ He pulls the curtains open with a flourish. ‘My feeling is the light’s good for you, Frank. My name’s Kyle, by the way.’

When he holds out his hand for me to shake, I fling the mug of tea he’s placed on my bedside table across the room. It smashes against the wall. ‘There’s ya fight, Paddy.’

He crouches down then stands up, hands cupping shards of the broken mug. ‘Paddy?’ he says. ‘I haven’t heard that one since I was a kid.’ Then he disappears and returns with a portrait of my wife. ‘This room needs something, Frank. I found it in the lounge collecting dust behind the piano. It might cheer you up.’

My sister in law painted that just after we moved into this flat in 1969. The portrait shows my young wife sitting in an old chair, passed down to her by her mother, wearing a red dress I bought for her from Marks and Spencer’s. We were fresh from London—newlyweds starting a new life next to the sea. I started up a picture framing business, while she kept home. That was one of the first pictures I framed. At the end of that first year, she was pregnant with Rachel and I spent my first year’s profits on the same Triumph Dolomite wiped out by that blasted tree. The chair is still in the corner, a bowl of potpourri arranged on the seat by my house-proud daughter.

‘So she yer wife?’ Kyle hangs it on the wall in front of our bed where a mirror used to be. I remember she would stand there, pouting her lips as she put on lipstick, adjusting her skirt on hips that even when she was a pile of bones under white sheets, still made me want to pull her to me. Out of the window I see black clouds have rolled in across the channel. A tear trickles down my cheek so I grab a tissue and pretend to blow my nose—dabbing away the tears before squishing it into a ball and tossing it at Kyle. It

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hits him on the back but he doesn't notice. He folds his arms and cocks his head to one side as he admires the painting.

'You know how much that hurts, havin' her here?' I say.

'Yer can't just shut yerself away like this, Frank. I've worked with old people before and ...'

'And what, you find digging up painful memories gives them something to smile about?'

'She's pretty,' he says looking at the painting. 'I gotta ask though, why'd yer do it?'

'You got yourself a girlfriend?'

'Yes ... I mean, no, she's ...'

'She know you go sniffing around men's dead wives?'

'Me girlfriend's ...' he hesitates.

'Me girlfriend's ...' My exaggerated attempt at an Irish accent sound fittingly self-pitying.

He sits on the end of the bed. 'She's gone, all right?'

'Gone?'

'My fiancé needs a break—time to think. We were supposed to be married next month. So yes, Frank, you're not the only one suffering—' A thud against the window interrupts him and he springs up from the bed to the window and presses his face over a greasy smudge on the other side of the glass. 'D'yer you see that?'

'See what?'

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He turns to me. ‘Something flew into the glass, Frank.’ He opens up the window and leans out. ‘Must’ve been a bird. Do you think it’s dead?’

Although I’ve never seen a seagull crash into a window, Rachel claims it happens a lot. ‘We’re eight floors up, of course, it’s bloody dead.’

He turns and looks at me with eyebrows raised. ‘Let’s see, shall we?’

‘You’ve left the window open,’ I call after him. ‘Trying to freeze me to death, are ya?’ Kyle’s footsteps disappear down the parqueted hall followed by the front door slammed shut. I’m left me with the persistent tick of the old drop-dial clock in the hall. I asked Rachel to stop winding that clock when she moved in but she refused. She said it reminded her of her mum—exactly the reason I wanted rid of it. My wife bought it in an antique shop next to the train station. She was always buzzing around that place, coming back all excited with bric-a-brac or larger pieces like that clock. Even after the diagnosis, before chemo started, she would disappear every Friday and return, more often than not, with something old and useless. I put my fingers in my ears to mute the ticking clock but still hear the front door slam shut followed by footsteps, at a more measured pace, clip-clopping down the hallway. ‘My daughter finds you’ve been wearing shoes in the flat she’ll string you up,’ I call.

‘Alive,’ Kyle stands in the doorway, a little out of breath, clutching a seagull in both hands, slipping off his shoes by pulling the heel against the other shoe’s toe.

I take my fingers from my ears. ‘Throw that thing out the window. And when you’ve done that shut it—you trying to finish me off by freezing me to death?’

He stands for a moment smiling, tilting his head like he did in front of the painting.

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‘What you smiling about?’ I say.

‘I don't think there are any bones broken. Maybe she's stunned or shocked ... she might be concussed.’ He looks at me with big blue, hopeful, eyes.

‘Flush it down the toilet,’ I say.

‘I'd almost given up finding her when I saw her in a hedge. It must have broken her fall.’

‘Her? How do you know it's a her?’

‘Just get a sense of it being a girl bird.’

‘When Rachel returns she's gonna flush you down the bog when she sees you've brought a seagull into the flat.’

He grabs a pillow from the side my wife used to sleep and places the gull in the centre like a gift. It raises a wing but nothing more; one eye remains open and unblinking, the other half shut.

‘That's my wife's pillow, not a place for dead birds.’ I can see my wife looking up at me from the bed. The pain from cancer that started in her breast before spreading to every part of her body contorted her face into a permanent expression of suffering. If I've done one good thing in my life, it's ending her agony. ‘You're here to look after me until Monday morning, not play Dr bloody Doolittle. Now do something useful and make me some lunch.’

‘That's a point,’ says Kyle. He pretends to shiver and pulls the window shut. ‘I'll feed her some of that liver your daughter left you. How you can eat that stuff I don't know.’

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‘Just get my lunch and while you’re crying over the onions, think how you’ll get rid of that bird not keep it alive.’

‘Her names Muriel, what do yer think?’

Hearing my wife’s name spoken loud is like having hot needles jabbed into my ears. Is he doing this on purpose?

‘It was my gran’s name,’ says Kyle and winks at me. ‘She was a funny old bird too.’

‘Just get my lunch on.’

Kyle leaves the seagull on the pillow with me. It’s not big. It must be young. There’s an even split of grey and white feathers and an orange beak that occasionally opens up as if expecting fish. When she stops moving, I call him in. ‘She’s dead,’ I say but he checks her and soon enough she’s lifting that wing like an invitation to come under it. After that, it’s all about the bird. I keep calling it the bird and each time he corrects me.

‘Her name’s Muriel, Frank,’ he says. ‘You can feed her if you like.’

‘I’m not feeding that bloody bird when I haven’t eaten myself. Where’s my lunch?’

He puts one finger up and returns with a dish of liver and onions.

‘I almost heaved cooking that muck,’ he says, and lifts the bird—with the pillow—and they disappear into the kitchen. Bloody lovely, the liver and onions, but when he returns to take my dish, I keep the compliments to myself.

‘Our Muriel ate the liver,’ he says.

‘She’s not my Muriel. Stop saying that. Muriel was my wife’s name as you no doubt know.’

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‘Really? I’m sorry, Frank, I didn’t know.’

‘You know all right, my daughter must have told you.’

‘Honest to god, Frank, my gran’s name was Muriel.’ He hesitates. ‘She’ll pull through, you’ll see.’ He takes the plate and starts banging pots in the kitchen.

‘I don’t give a damn if she pulls through,’ I yell after him.

Towards evening, the newlyweds in the flat above start making their bedsprings moan—it’s a sluggish rhythm that never seems to get much beyond the can-we-just-get-this-over-and-watch-telly tempo. Muriel and I were always at it when we were first married. We would do it everywhere, even the kitchen on occasion. Memories of making love to my Muriel send my cock into an erection. It hasn’t done that for a while. I do nothing with it—too much pleasure might finish me off— so I allow it to wither in my hand. Muscles—as if previously taut with sexual tension—succumb to the delicious whole-body softness I remember follows sex. Muriel would always tuck herself under my arm. I’d apologise for the smell. She’d giggle.

I wake with a start. Kyle appears in the doorway to the bedroom with the seagull on the pillow. ‘Yer awake at last,’ he says. ‘I let yer sleep—a lot of moaning going on there, Frank.’

‘What moaning?’

‘There’s a problem. I think Muriel’s wing’s broken.’ He places it next to me. Muriel’s head stays still, one eye-rolling left and right as if she’s watching tennis. ‘I’m gonna put her out of her misery.’

‘How?’

‘Break her neck.’

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Kyle's phone beeps. He pulls his phone from his pocket, rolls his eyes to mine. Smiles.

'Fiancé?' I say.

He steps away from the bed, staring at his phone, leaving Muriel on the pillow. When I look up from the bird, he's gone.

Summers, as a child, we would leave London and visit my grandparents in the country. My grandfather would have me chasing Sunday lunch around their backyard, so I've snapped the necks of countless chickens. But reaching my hand towards the more robust neck of Muriel I know I cannot do this. I just can't be responsible for another Muriel's death.

Kyle walks back in and hovers over the bed; his cheeks are damp, shoulders tensed unevenly so his right shoulder is higher than his left.

'Everything all right?' I say.

'It's over,' he says and takes the pillow but I grab it before he can take it away. Then I snatch Muriel and pull her to my chest. 'Leave her.'

'Frank, I'm gonna do it. She's suffering.'

'You asked why I wanted to kill my wife. Well, my Muriel had cancer. I couldn't watch her suffer like that. I was supposed—'

He puts out his hands. 'I'm sorry to hear that, Frank. I understand: yer wanted to go with her. Like ending yer wife's pain, putting our Muriel out her misery, it's the right thing to do. Now give her over.'

'I will not!' Muriel's wings spasm in my hands, her head rolls back and she thrusts her beak forward, opening it wide. More of a gull-whimper rather than a cry

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leaves her mouth, followed by another louder attempt as her beak opens wide. After the third or fourth attempt she's making ear-piercing screeches.

'Yer see she's in pain, Frank. We need to do this,' yells Kyle above the cries of the distressed gull.

I let her fall from my hands and she lands on the pillow and begins thrashing around where my Muriel used to rest her head after boats of chemotherapy.

'Look, lad, this bird—it's worth a shot—she might just fly.' One of Muriel's wings stretch wider than the pillow but the other stays close to her.

'Frank, that wing's hurtin' her.' But then as if in response to Kyle's diagnosis, she withdraws the outstretched wing into her body before spreading both wings in a violent impulse to fly, to wriggle free of death's clutches.

'Will yer look at that?' says Kyle.

'Open the window.'

Kyle dashes to the window and flings it wide. 'What now?'

'Throw her out.'

'But she'll ...'

'Do it, Kyle, cos I can't.'

Kyle grabs the pillow. Again Muriel pulls her wings into her body, then out again.

'Think she'll be fine, Frank?'

'It's fly or die, Kyle.'

Kyle rests the pillow on the windowsill and slips his hand under her body. I see my Muriel propped up by that pillow, reading one of those romance novels she was so fond of. Sometimes she'd laugh at the ridiculous plot or overblown characters; but it

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wasn't unusual for her green eyes to let a tear loose down her cheek. "Throw her out with that pillow, lad."

Kyle remains statue-still, arms folded, peering out the window where he's just dropped Muriel. She must have followed the pillow to the ground. It's over. Poor thing. But then he flings his head back, whooping encouragement. Framed by the bedroom window, Muriel swoops upwards, drawn by thermal currents, spiralling high into the blue cloud-free sky.